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SUBJECT: NOT AFRAID: AFGHAN WOMEN LEADERS, ROLE MODELS, AND
THE NEXT GENERATION

¶1. (U) An impressive sampling of Afghan women leaders attended a December 4 human rights and gender violence seminar, jointly sponsored by the Ministry of Interior and the US Embassy. International media coverage focused on quotes about increasing threats to women in public life. The participants, however, offered a more sophisticated analysis of the situation of women in Afghanistan today, stressing the historical, social, and economic context.

¶2. (SBU) Afghan National Army General Khatool, who leads the Army's training department, noted that deteriorating public security and the economic downturn are now joining persistent female illiteracy and "unacceptable" traditions as drivers of violence against women. "Women pay the price of crimes against men," she said, when families use forced marriages to pay off blood and honor debts that result from the lawless conflicts of the insurgency.

¶3. (SBU) Azra Jafari, the recently-appointed mayor of the provincial capital of Dai Kundi and the country's first woman to hold such a post, said development was her first priority. Implementing the long-delayed municipal plan for public services, Jafari argued, was the fastest and best way to change the situation of women. Afghan National Police

¶4. (SBU) Colonel Maria Sediqqa Rasekh cited Islamic teachings that protect women's rights, and noted that, unlike the "corruption of the Taliban," this government has made progress in setting up institutions such as specialized police units to address family violence. As for the burqa and similar traditions, Sediqqa Rasekh told reporters: "The uniform itself is a sign of courage for women. It shows we are not afraid."

ROLE MODELS AND THE FUTURE

¶5. (SBU) These prominent women, and others like them, are both a force for change now and role models for the next generation. On December 3, more than 20 Afghan women leaders and their daughters and nieces attended a "Mother-Daughter Career Day" hosted by the Embassy. In a lively open-mike format, Afghan and American women traded stories of experiences in overcoming discrimination, building careers, and balancing work and family. Judge Uzra Zoi said, "The Taliban told me I couldn't be a judge because I am a woman. Look, here, now I am a judge. And a judge in the counternarcotics court, which is very difficult." An young NGO leader spoke up: "I am 19 years old," she said. "I run my organization because I am ready to help other women." A daughter, aged 12, took the floor to announce that she admired her mother's career in politics. As for herself, and

the future, "I will run for president."
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